

THE ENGLISH PEASANT.

IN HIS HABIT AS HE LIVES.

ARCADY; OR BETTER FOR WORSE. A Study of Rural Life in England. By Augustus Jessopp, D. D. Illustrated. 25s. G. P. Putnam's Sons.

This is a capital book. The author is one of those English clergymen of the Established Church who live in country parishes on small incomes and interest themselves in the affairs of all the parishioners, of whom the greater number are small farmers and peasants. Not that there are really many country parishes of the calibre of Dr. Jessopp's. He is one of the few who have learned to the confidence of, perhaps, the most conservative and most stupid class in the world. It is not to be thought that this was done in the course of glibly ministrations. The simple truth is, that if Dr. Jessopp had only cultivated the peasants who went to church, he would never have caused the information so delightfully set forth in these present pages. The author was evidently equipped by Nature for the work of investigation. He was patient, good tempered, broad of sympathies, tolerant even of virtual paupers, quick to get at the hidden springs of action in the stout, rugged, bovine creatures about him. Then too, he possessed one strong recommendation to the poor. He was poor himself. Generally speaking, there is a great gulf fixed between the gentry and the poor in English rural life. The latter regard the former as belonging to quite another race than their own, and if an attempt is made to bridge the gulf they shrink into their shells like tortoises and become impenetrable.

To open these shy and suspicious souls there must be something of kinship, some feeling of a common ground of suffering. The young curate struggling to maintain himself, and perhaps a wife also, on ten shillings a week, is by his indigence brought nearer to his poor parishioners. They can understand and sympathize with him as one of themselves, and if such a one is judicious he can draw them out and get to know them. Dr. Jessopp's cure is in East Anglia, and he has made so close a study of rural life in Norfolk that we know not where else a better and more trustworthy account of it can be found than in these pages. The things he has noted are often quite contrary to the opinions of modern economists, but it will not do therefore to reject them, for the author never draws conclusions without showing how they were reached, and his observation is so comprehensive that even his most peculiar views may be treated respectfully. His account of rural England is of course not general but particular. It is the story of but one district, but no doubt many of the conditions are universal. In regard to the broad inductions from his researches, they are in many cases such as to justify gloomy anticipations. The best of the peasants, he tells us, are being driven off the land. Some go to the towns, some emigrate, but in neither case do they return. This movement of depopulation has several causes. The large-farm notion, which was endemic a few years ago, but has now passed its climax, tends to cast the peasants by absorbing the small farms and reducing the farm empires to the condition of "hand." Finding their independence threatened and the stability of their employment, the best men gradually left the country. Another cause of migration and emigration was the feeling that agriculture did not offer a career. It is not easy to discover just where Dr. Jessopp stands on this question, for while he states positively that the absence of a career has driven thousands out, in another chapter he contends that the country does offer a sufficiently promising career to all who have some brains and self-denial, and he cites a number of specific instances in support of this position.

Probably the agricultural laborers themselves generally held that the country did not offer them a career. The first effects of the extension of educational advantages too have been to produce discontent, and rightly. For one of the worst features of English rural life is the way the peasants are housed. Dr. Jessopp speaks with indignant emphasis of this. He says plainly that civilization cannot be carried forward under the existing conditions, and he gives plenty of convincing illustrations. Thus in one place he says: "You may see whole rows of hovels in no one of which would any farmer in the parish put his hog for a single night without indignation—rows of hovels where there are only two rooms, one above and one below. I could point to three of these disgraceful tenements immediately contiguous to one another, in each of which, by a strange coincidence, there were lately a father, mother and seven children all sleeping in a single room!" It is no wonder that when young men and women who have been reared in such dens acquire a little knowledge they become disgusted and refuse to stay where these concretions of life exist. As to the responsibility for the shamefully bad housing of agricultural laborers, Dr. Jessopp is not perhaps so clear as could be wished. According to him, the worst cases occur in what are called "open parishes"; that is, where there is no lord of the manor, but the surrounding country belongs to a considerable number of comparatively small owners or lease-holders. These as a rule are too poor to afford to build decent cottages for their laborers, and in such places the hovels inhabited by the peasants are usually the property of some small tradesman or local usurer, who thinks only of getting seven per cent interest on his investment and cares not a rap how his tenants pig together. The agricultural depression, which has lasted several years now, has shown the men who went in for large holdings the fallacy of their ideas. Dr. Jessopp holds that large farming is condemned; that the limit of profitable absorption has been passed; and that a reaction is setting in. Meantime, however, great mischief has been done. The peasant have been driven away. The small farmers have almost disappeared. The housing of the peasants who remain is in most cases as bad as if not worse than ever. Rural life has been beaten down into deadly dullness through the well-meant efforts of the evangelical party, which a generation ago was so horrified at the pagan jollity of the people that it preached a crusade against amusement.

The village fairs and festivals, the games on the green, the clubs, the sporting associations, have all been banished. One result is that the British peasant has become the most melancholy of beings. "In Arcady we never hear people laugh. They sing and grin sometimes, and then turn away as if ashamed of themselves; but they never laugh." And the good doctor draws a picture: "You may see half a dozen hulking young men literally sprawling in the ditch, smoking their pipes, and sunning themselves on their stomachs in the summer evenings, doing the only thing they have any power of doing—nothing. Do you wonder if these young fellows get tired of it and vaguely find it dull?" It would be nothing surprising if they took to drink, and probably there would be a great deal more drunkenness than there is, but for one saving circumstance. The beer is usually so bad that it revolts even these coarse stomachs. Dr. Jessopp is of the opinion that there is not much spirit-drinking in rural England. In Norfolk he says the rustics know no more about brandy than they do of nectar. Beer is the regular drink, and as the quality of the malt liquor seems to be deteriorating steadily perhaps temperance principles may triumph through this curious state of things. Comparing the past with the present the author finds that the peasant to-day is certainly better off in many respects than his grandfather. He has higher wages, better and more abundant food, lighter hours, better opportunities for raising himself. On the other hand he has decidedly less fun, though the fun of the past generation was often cruel and temerarious. The old-fashioned peasant was very law-abiding. He feared all law in a vague, chidish way. The village constable could do anything with the most turbulent crowd by merely lifting his truncheon and saying "In the name of the King!" Now the people are less easily controlled. Not only is the schoolmaster abroad, but the demagogue and the dynast. There have always been vicious youths, but the vicious youth of the period, Dr. Jessopp thinks, is a particularly depraved species, and breeds forth threatenings and slaughters.

In explaining why he has not attempted to give the political opinions of the swains of Arcady, the author observes: "They have no opinions; they have no views; they have no theories. The peasant, whether of Arcady or Attica, is a very practical

person, who knows what he wants in the main, but is absolutely without any notion how what he wants can be obtained for him by anybody but himself. He is utterly unable to grasp the abstract notion even of a body politic; it is intensely local in his prejudices and sentiments. It may be doubted whether he is animated by any real patriotism. For great public questions, except as they may directly affect his own interests, he cares not a straw; it must be a long time before the vote of the agricultural laborers can represent anything better than the views of those who happen to dominate over them for the time being." This is not a cheerful outlook for those who are patriotic. It promises a rich harvest to the swarms of rascals who are always ready to exploit ignorant voters in every country, and who know only too well how to make the worse appear the better cause. And perhaps long before the swains have been educated up to the intelligence of the ballot Arcady will have been depopulated. If the present conditions are to continue this seems inevitable. With the degradation of the agricultural laborer, possibly cheaper labor may take its place; as has happened now these many years in a single direction; namely, the annual influx of Irish at harvest time. Only the conservatism of the Arcadian peasant at present holds him to the soil, and that conservatism is clearly to match in the long run for the strong influences which are both drawing and driving him away from his immemorial fields.

The Arcadians are not without imagination, and they still cling to superstitions of an old-fashioned kind. The belief in the evil eye survives among them, and many a woman, when his cow falls sick, or the bright appears in his potatoes, or any other small trouble occurs, suspects that he has been "overlooked" by an enemy. The belief in witches is not extinct, and "wise women" and "cunning men" not infrequently make a fair livelihood out of the credulity of their neighbors. Dr. Jessopp cites cases in which peasants and small farmers who thought they had been "overlooked" resort to the approved remedy, which is, drawing blood from the suspected witch. In one instance a farmer was taken to the net of furiously beating a poor woman, because he thought she had bewitched him. He was taken before the magistrates and fined. He paid the fine; but as Mr. Serouffius laid down the money he protested before gods and men that it was all very well for the gentlemen to talk their high-down bombast when the reporters were present to take them down. But you were never going to make him believe but that "there ain't none on 'em as wouldn't ha' served that there woman wasn't I did he been overlooked some as I was!"

The swains of Arcady hold to Mischiefism often, and the way in which they regard Providence is illus- trated by an amusing story. An old farmer had lost his wife, and the person, who was a recently imported town man, ignorant of rustic ways, paid him a visit of condolence. "The good vicar spoke such comfort as he could, and more than once insisted on the obvious truth that the ordering of Divine Providence must not be murmured at, and that 'Providence' must needs be submitted to with resignation. The sorrowing farmer listened patiently and silently for some minutes. At last he could refrain no longer, but opened his mouth and spoke, saying, 'That's right, but that's not all. There ain't no use a gamain' on it; but somehow that there old Providence he been agin me all along, and now he's been and got hold to my mossa! But,' he added, with a burst of heroic faith and devout assurance, 'I reckon as there's one abey as I'll stop a'pon ha' it goin on in it!' One would imagine that the theology of Arcadia must be somewhat confused by the spiritual shepherds of the region.

Dr. Jessopp bears testimony to the bold which the primitive Methodists have upon the peasantry in many parts of England. He says: "Explain it how we will, and draw our inferences as we choose, there's no denying it that in hundreds of parishes in England the stuffy little chapel by the roadside has been the only place where for many a long day the very existence of religious emotion has been recognized, the only place in which the yearnings of the soul and its strong emotions and tears have been allowed to express themselves in the language of the moment, whether by plain forms; the only place where the agonized conscience has been encouraged and invited to rid itself of its sore burden by confession and contrite at least the semblance of sympathy; the only place where the peasants have enjoyed the free expression of their opinions, and where, under an organization elaborated with extraordinary sagacity, they have kept up a school of music, literature and politics, self-supporting and managed by dole or subsidy—above all, a school of eloquence, in which the lowest of the lowliest have been enabled to speak with clearness and distinctness, and to make themselves heard in the pulpit."

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